Thomas Fröhlich: *Tang Junyi: Confucian Philosophy and the Challenge of Modernity*. Leiden: Brill, 2018, 324 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-33014-6.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2018-0031

There are books that require much time for reading. In contrast to most of the research published in our fast-paced world of academia, there are studies that demand their reader's attention, pondering, reflection, and perhaps even meditation. Using Nietzsche's terms, those texts and their authors are "friends of *lento*".[1] The book under review here – *Tang Junyi: Confucian Philosophy and the Challenge of Modernity* by Thomas Fröhlich – is such a book: a masterpiece slowly written (almost fifteen years) that invites us "to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow."

The book is primarily concerned with Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978), a Hong Kong-based Chinese philosopher, often considered as a key representative of New Confucianism. Despite the title, the reader expecting an intellectual biography of the man will be unmistakably wrong. What Thomas Fröhlich has produced with this text assembling years of research and several articles previously published here and there in English and German, is a genuine work on political philosophy and an acute entry into the intellectual history of Modern China, and perhaps a reflection on political modernity as a whole. First, Tang is not the only protagonist studied; Fröhlich discusses in depth and sometimes at length some elements of other modern Chinese contemporary thinkers and activists, notably Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1887–1969), Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1903–1982) and Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995).[2] In so doing, he takes seriously the claims of Confucianism to global significance and engages with the political philosophies of those authors as constitutive sources of knowledge and debates. Furthermore, the study elaborates with much precision the intellectual and historical conditions under which they produced their works. Thomas Fröhlich does so without falling into the trap of arbitrating between their Confucian background and supposed Western philosophical influences. In fact, in my opinion, Fröhlich

1 Nietzsche 1997: 5.

2 In the early chapters of the book, Fröhlich gives notably much attention to the 1958 famous *Declaration to the World for Chinese Culture* co-signed by the four men. I would, however, tend to say that he sometimes considers this text too much as a genuine and sole production of Tang, without considering the input others may had had in it.

fulfills his self-set objective of challenging "the notion that modern Confucianism can be comprehended as the mere product of specific influence from Western or Chinese sources" (p. 36).

As he clearly states in his preface, Fröhlich endeavors "to do more than think about" Tang; he wishes to "think *with* Tang and, consequently, at times go beyond him" (p. vii). At some point, one could even wonder whether Fröhlich does not also think *against* Tang, notably when he exposes the omissions and problems within Tang's argumentation in order to bring the debate to a higher level. The author also rejects the attempt to reconstruct Tang's philosophy "as a closed system free from inner contradiction" (p. vii) and does not contribute to what Quentin Skinner had coined the "mythology of coherence" (p. 33). Tang's philosophy is not simply exposed and justified; it is questioned at its very core, and in its sometimes problematic articulations. Fröhlich clearly interrogates the thinker under examination, and ponders on the ramifications of his propositions on issues that he disregarded more or less consciously, or even on problems he did not have in mind. The concluding chapter on Tang's view on the totalitarian challenge, and notably the problem raised by the absence of discussion about the Holocaust and the Gulag in contemporary Chinese political philosophy reaches here an apogee. Fröhlich takes Tang Junyi seriously and handles his works as if they were parts of the classical canon of political philosophy.

As a matter of fact, and although the author does not make reference to cross-cultural or comparative political theory, as for instance understood by Fred Dallmayr[3] or more recently by Leigh Jenco in her attempt to engage seriously and creatively Chinese thought,[4] *Tang Junyi* is clearly a successful attempt to introduce New Confucian philosophers, in particular Tang, as global thinkers of modernity that ought to be read and discussed in a general conversation with more conventional western political philosophers.[5] After reading this study, and notably the dialogues instigated between Tang and Euro-American political thinkers – mostly German philosophers though – it leaves no doubt that Tang's *oeuvre* ought to be regarded as an essential part of the corpus of texts people doing political theory should have read. In this regard, I personally found illuminating the multiple parallels Fröhlich draws between Tang and Max Weber. The intersections and disparities he finds between them, hint toward a global revaluation of this exiled thinker of modernity.

3 Dallmayr 2004: 249–257.

4 Jenco 2015.

5 It seems to me that this conversation has so far been very specifically oriented toward metaphysical issues. The abundant academic literature on "intellectual intuition" and the dialogue between Kant and Mou Zongsan is symptomatic of this.

Tang's ideas on religions and religiosity within modernity, as well as his manner of envisioning a form of ethical pluralism in democratic societies, transcend indeed the Confucian canvas on which they were formulated, and could be of interest for any political thinker questioning the place of religion in modern societies.

Fröhlich succeeds in the goal of engaging with modern Chinese philosophers, and bringing with seriousness and respect their arguments into a global discussion without falling into a decontextualized comparative philosophical approach; indeed he takes much time to contextualize the historical and social standpoints from which those philosophers took their stand, as well as the conceptual history of the vocabulary they deployed. However, the author has obviously another objective; this book embarks on the endeavor of saving Tang Junyi from his readers and commentators. As mentioned above, Tang has often been considered as a key actor of the New Confucian movement, a dynamic that led many of his readers to locate or even confine him within the analytical scope of Confucianism. Fröhlich clearly points it out: Tang has often been read as a proponent of Confucianism. As a consequence, many commentators have been seeing in his works a form of Confucian apologetics, without really taking the measure of his critical assessment of Confucian thought and its failure in modern Chinese society. But if read carefully, as Fröhlich does, it appears that Tang's works published in the 1950s clearly "attempted to move beyond Neo-Confucianism" (p. 46). On many elements, Tang's philosophy turned its back on classical Confucianism; here are several examples: Against the stereotype of the traditionalist Confucian thinker that would bring society to harmony thanks to moral cultivation and the transformative work of sage and saints, Tang conceptualized inner sagehood as a fleeting moment of moral intuition, a situation that implies that "an enduring, morally perfect human community cannot be attained and political reality cannot be turned into an earthly paradise" (p. 225). For him, "any hope that sages can or will intervene in historical reality is [...] futile" (p. 136). In fact, Tang relieved "politics from claims to a higher moral truth" (p. 236). Furthermore, Fröhlich clearly shows that Tang was "aware of the ideological dangers lurking around an apologetic approach to Confucianism under modern conditions" (p. 57). Notwithstanding the commonplaces of Confucian political tradition, Tang clearly conceived a separation between the spheres of politics and ethics. Aside from his faith in the original nature of humans being good, he also acknowledged the innate lust for power that motivates men in politics. "In abandoning the political tradition of Confucianism and its notions of benevolent rule by the superior individuals, Tang [...] conceptualized political

power in a way that [...] was never done in China's traditional political philosophies" (p. 213). He also had "no intention of establishing rigid moral standards for self-cultivation" (p. 149). He is not even defending a 'Chinese' culture clearly identified in Confucianism, against the West. In the end, with this portrait given by Fröhlich, Tang does not appear like a common traditionalist Confucian; there is much more complexity and subtlety in his defense of Confucianism than what has been said of him so far.

As already hinted, it should also be mentioned that Thomas Fröhlich takes in this book a very special interest in Tang Junyi's political philosophy – a topic hardly explored by previous studies except perhaps by Steven Angle and Thomas Metzger.[6] However, Fröhlich delves into texts ignored by the above mention researchers, which enables him to give a more accurate evaluation of Tang's philosophy and to contradict them on several key points. The not so plentiful Chinese research on the topic is also discussed thoroughly. What is redeeming in Fröhlich's work is that it takes Tang Junyi away from a strand of scholars who only read Tang as a thinker versed in metaphysical consideration. While focusing on the second part of Tang's life and work (1940s–1960s) – a period in which he didn't simply reflect on Chinese Culture as Umberto Bresciani implied[7] – he sides with Lee Ming-huei in rejecting the common opinion "that modern Confucian philosophers systematically confounded politics and ethics, as well as the subjective will and objective social relations" (p. 55). He furthermore clearly points at the fact that Tang Junyi should not be reduced to the supposed synthesis of nine spheres proposed in *The Existence of Life and World of the Spirit* (*Shengming cunzai yu xinling jingjie* 生命存在與心靈境界) written in 1977.

It would be impossible to summarize here all the elements put forward in the 12 chapters of this book. Indeed, despite its not being too long (roughly 300 pages), it should be said that it is a *very dense* book. Every page is filled with thoughtful details on Tang's texts and life. With every new paragraph, Fröhlich pushes the reflection further and engages with a vast literature written in Chinese, English, German and French. As stated above, this book requires a slow reading – Fröhlich's complex, sometimes too complex, prose makes it compulsory. Perhaps one could even complain that this study may be difficult to go through for someone not already a little familiarized with the debates concerning the Chinese experience of modernity and to some extent New Confucianism. A solid understanding of philosophy is also required, since Thomas Fröhlich discusses in depth Tang's argument and reasoning in

6 Notably Angle 2012; and several chapters of Metzger 2005.

7 Bresciani 2001: 308–309.

dialogues with important philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Nietzsche or Rousseau.[8] Also, despite the fact that he often restates his directing lines and his thesis – like when he repeatedly insists on the importance of Tang's exilic experience, his understanding of *liang zhi* and of sagehood as fleeting moments, or globally on what Fröhlich appropriately calls Tang Junyi's civil theology – he nevertheless does not linger on the numerous concepts, theories and judgments he agglomerated in the development of his arguments, forcing the reader to be very careful not to forget anything that may impede his understanding of later parts of the study.

In his preface, Fröhlich implies that the chapters could be read more or less discontinuously, and that some texts would even be of lesser interest for people not looking for a presentation of the political and historical context. One must agree with the author on the fact that some passages are more intellectual history oriented, while others lean toward political philosophy. However, there is nonetheless a clear movement in the way Fröhlich deploys Tang's philosophy; first it sets the problematic, then puts forward Tang's civil theology as an entry framework, and finally addresses Tang's political reflection.

After setting the scope of his study and presenting the challenge faced by Tang (chapter 1), the author ponders the main critical issues in research on Modern Confucianism (chapter 2). In this chapter, he also presents a brief overview of what has been written on Tang Junyi so far, a move that already gives him a possibility to specify his method of study and the points generally omitted in the research concerning Modern Confucianism. In a chapter 3, very rich in historic details, Fröhlich concludes his introductory chapters by reproblematizing the common perspectives on Tang Junyi's thought.

With chapter 4, Fröhlich really starts dwelling in the matter at hands by inquiring into the challenges and contexts in which Tang produced his works in political philosophy: exile. According to him, Tang was more than an exiled thinker, he was a philosopher of exile. "Tang conceptualized the exilic experience as a sort of prism through which one could not only grasp the nature of modernity, but also conceive of ways to cope with it" (p. 3). Chapters 5 and 6 then present Tang's civil theology and his moral philosophy. This part of the book is not only crucial because it expands on key loci of Tang's philosophy such as his appropriation and uses of the notion of *liang zhi* 良知 in contrast to earlier thinkers such as Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) or his understanding of ethical pluralism, but also because, as convincingly shown, they set the framework that made possible his philosophical undertaking. After all, Tang's

8 The text is always given in an English translation, but Thomas Fröhlich reproduced when needed the German or French wording used.

"political thinking starts from strong religious-metaphysical assumptions about the nature of man" (p. 215). I personally found chapter 6 very interesting because Fröhlich's reading of Tang invites us to call into question "a common assumption in research on Confucianism which posits that self-cultivation is quintessentially guided by *moral* concerns" (p. 150).[9] It is also in this chapter that the author opens a line of questioning about the problematic omission of psychoanalysis in contemporary Confucian philosophy and the challenge set by Freud to self-cultivation: "How can the ego authenticate his or her self-cultivating practices and distinguish them from the super-ego's oppressive rule?" (p. 151) – a question that appears to be often forgotten by the contemporary apologists of Confucian philosophy or self-cultivation practices.

Chapter 7 begins the last part of the book, which is properly dedicated to Tang Junyi's political philosophy and its theoretical consequences. First, Fröhlich shows how "profoundly Tang's thought differs from common [...] interpretations of Confucianism and its idea of man" (p. vii), notably by insisting on the importance accorded to the problem of lust or will for power, something that Tang considered "intrinsically related to the formation of moral subjectivity" (p. 178). Chapters 8 and 9 consequently question Tang Junyi's understanding and discussions of Statehood, and of what the place of Confucianism in a Chinese democracy yet to be realized could be. The very short chapter 10 continues with what a Civil Religion on a Confucian Basis could be for China. The last two chapters are finally dedicated to what Tang, probably improperly, called his "Philosophy of History" and to the problem of totalitarian regimes.

This very last chapter clearly goes *beyond* Tang. And its conclusion entailing the fact that "the reflection on the Holocaust sobers optimistic outlooks on modernity" (p. 286) such as the one put forward by Tang, sets a real challenge to contemporary Confucian political philosophy. Tang's – or other Chinese philosophers' – omission of the Holocaust cannot be justified by historical contextualization. If no Confucian philosophy can grasp the Holocaust and the Gulag as distinctive features of modernity as suggested by Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), there is perhaps a serious challenge to tackle in order to establish a Confucian political philosophy of modernity as globally valid. In my opinion, by raising this aporia, Fröhlich takes very seriously the possibility of a Confucian philosophy of modernity, and he calls for substantive answer from the Confucian side. Indeed, the book's last pages establishing a connection between Tang and the Arendt from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* on the problem of the "moral responsibility for resisting socialization" appears a faint solution, if not a consolation prize.

9 This is a point on which Fröhlich strongly disagrees with Metzger's understanding of Tang.

Amidst the dialogues Thomas Fröhlich has set between Tang and other philosophers, be they Western or Chinese, the final portrait given to us is the one of a man in "delicate balance between skeptical realism and critical idealism" (p. 205). The author succeeds in giving us a profound and well-documented presentation of this great thinker of modernity. Simultaneously, he really engages in a philosophical conversation with Tang Junyi, making this work more than a descriptive sinological study; it becomes a valuable work in philosophy. It is a book whose extensive remarks and developments will require careful and *lento* readers – a book on intellectual history as it should be written.

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